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Street-Level Bureaucracy in School Reform Governance

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Abstract

Professional learning systems in schools are increasingly embedded within accountability and performance management frameworks, positioning middle leaders at the center of policy enactment processes. While existing research emphasizes organizational design as a mechanism for leadership development, less attention has been given to how professional learning policies are implemented through frontline discretion. This study aims to reconstruct middle leadership development models through a Policy Implementation and Street-Level Bureaucracy lens to examine how instrument design shapes discretionary enactment and implementation outcomes. The study employs a qualitative case study analysis based exclusively on secondary data sources, including government regulations, policy reports, peer-reviewed academic literature, and authoritative institutional publications. Using thematic analysis, the research redefines the unit of analysis from organizational structures to implementation mechanisms and discretionary practices. Analytical dimensions derived from policy implementation theory — such as instrument formalization, accountability coupling, adaptive enactment, and informal governance — guide the coding and interpretation of documentary evidence. The study focuses on contextual governance settings, particularly in developing-country administrative environments, to examine how discretion is structured and institutionalized. The findings indicate that distinct configurations of policy instruments generate identifiable discretion regimes that shape implementation fidelity, variation, and equity outcomes in professional learning systems. The study concludes that professional learning governance is fundamentally shaped by how discretion is structured, monitored, and negotiated within institutional contexts rather than by structural coherence alone. By integrating educational leadership research with street-level bureaucracy theory, this study contributes a discretion-regime framework that advances understanding of governance dynamics in educational reform implementation.

Keyword

1. Introduction

School systems across diverse governance contexts increasingly rely on middle leaders to translate reform agendas into everyday instructional practice. Positioned between senior leadership and classroom teachers, middle leaders are expected to coordinate curriculum, support teacher development, and ensure alignment with institutional priorities. Their roles have expanded alongside accountability pressures, performance management

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regimes, and demands for measurable school improvement. As reform initiatives multiply, schools depend on these actors to operationalize standards, evaluation frameworks, and improvement targets. In many jurisdictions, professional learning is no longer treated as a voluntary or peripheral activity but as a policy instrument tied to appraisal and performance outcomes. Consequently, the work of middle leaders is embedded in broader regulatory and accountability architectures. This transformation places them at the center of policy enactment processes rather than solely within internal leadership hierarchies. Understanding how they navigate this space is therefore critical for governance scholarship.

Despite this centrality, professional learning systems are often analyzed as organizational development strategies rather than as policy implementation arenas. Schools design appraisal systems, mentoring arrangements, inquiry programs, and specialist roles to improve teaching quality. These arrangements are typically framed as structural supports that enhance leadership capacity and collaborative learning. However, they also function as instruments through which policy priorities are interpreted and enacted at the frontline. When professional standards are translated into observation rubrics or inquiry protocols, they become operational rules that shape everyday decision-making. Middle leaders must interpret these instruments, allocate attention, and balance competing demands under conditions of limited time and resources. Their judgments directly influence how teachers experience accountability and development. This dynamic highlights the real-world relevance of analyzing professional learning as an implementation domain governed by discretionary actors.

Existing research has established that middle leaders play pivotal roles in instructional coordination and teacher support. Studies show that structured mentoring, coaching routines, and formalized appraisal systems can strengthen alignment between school missions and classroom practice. Scholars also emphasize the importance of coherent organizational design in embedding professional learning into daily work. Formal policies, clear role definitions, and layered leadership interactions are frequently associated with improved capacity building. Within this body of work, principal leadership is typically conceptualized as an organizational design function. The dominant analytical lens focuses on infrastructure coherence, role clarity, and structural alignment. Professional learning is therefore treated primarily as an outcome of effective organizational architecture. This perspective has advanced understanding of how schools can intentionally cultivate leadership capacity.

Yet important dimensions remain underexplored. Much less attention has been paid to how middle leaders exercise discretion when interpreting and enacting professional learning policies. The micro-level processes through which standards are translated into feedback, expectations are softened or intensified, and priorities are selectively emphasized are rarely examined systematically. Organizational structures may appear coherent on paper while producing varied enactment in practice. Differences in workload, risk perception, relational trust, and professional norms can shape how rules are applied. Informal adjustments, coping strategies, and rule bending may influence who receives support and how intensively. These discretionary dynamics are central to street-level bureaucracy theory but remain peripheral in mainstream leadership research. Without analyzing these processes, explanations of professional learning implementation remain incomplete.

The gap lies at the intersection of leadership studies and policy implementation scholarship. While educational governance research recognizes the importance of frontline actors, middle leadership research has not consistently conceptualized these

actors as street-level bureaucrats. Conversely, policy implementation studies have seldom examined professional learning systems within schools as structured sites of discretionary governance. This disconnect limits understanding of how instrument design shapes enactment outcomes such as fidelity, variation, and equity. Organizational design may structure roles and routines, but it also configures the boundaries of discretion. Different structural arrangements may generate distinct patterns of adaptive interpretation and informal governance. By synthesizing these perspectives, a more nuanced account of professional learning implementation becomes possible. Such integration allows the field to move beyond structural description toward analysis of discretionary mechanisms.

Addressing this gap is justified both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, reframing middle leaders as street-level bureaucrats aligns leadership research with broader debates on governance, accountability, and bureaucratic discretion. It enables scholars to examine how policy instruments mediate between formal expectations and lived practice. Practically, schools operate under intensified accountability pressures where implementation fidelity and equity are politically salient concerns. If discretionary practices shape which teachers receive support or how rigorously standards are enforced, then instrument design has distributional consequences. Understanding these mechanisms can inform more equitable and sustainable governance strategies. Moreover, clarifying how discretion is structured can help policymakers anticipate unintended variation across departments and schools. The integration of policy implementation theory therefore promises analytical leverage for both research and practice.

This study reconstructs principal-designed models of professional learning through a policy implementation and street-level bureaucracy lens. It redefines the unit of analysis from organizational structures to implementation mechanisms and discretionary practices. Professional learning is conceptualized as a policy domain enacted through instrument configurations that structure middle leader discretion. The analysis examines how different instrument designs shape adaptive enactment processes and informal governance patterns. Specifically, it asks how appraisal systems, specialist roles, and inquiry frameworks configure discretion boundaries. It also interrogates how these configurations influence policy fidelity, intra-school variation, and equity in access to professional learning. By foregrounding discretion as the central mediating variable, the study advances a causal logic linking instrument design to implementation outcomes. This reconceptualization reframes leadership development models as discretion governance regimes rather than merely structural arrangements.

The urgency of this inquiry stems from the increasing complexity of educational reform and the reliance on frontline actors to operationalize policy ambitions. As schools navigate competing demands for accountability, innovation, and equity, the governance of discretion becomes a critical concern. Instrument designs that inadequately anticipate discretionary dynamics may unintentionally produce uneven implementation or reinforce informal hierarchies. Conversely, thoughtfully structured instruments may balance fidelity with adaptive flexibility. By situating middle leadership within policy implementation theory, this article contributes to high-level debates on how public organizations govern frontline expertise. It provides a framework for analyzing professional learning systems as sites of bureaucratic mediation rather than purely developmental spaces. Through this reframing, the study aims to deepen understanding of how governance structures shape everyday enactment processes in schools..

2. Research Method

This study employed a qualitative case study design using secondary data to reconstruct middle leadership development models through a Policy Implementation and Street-Level Bureaucracy analytical framework (Rashid et al., 2019; Ruggiano & Perry, 2017). A qualitative approach was selected because the research seeks to understand complex policy enactment processes, discretionary practices, and governance dynamics that cannot be reduced to measurable variables (Azungah, 2018; Elbardan & Kholeif, 2017). Qualitative case study analysis is particularly appropriate for examining how institutional instruments shape frontline behavior within bounded organizational contexts (Rashid et al., 2019). By focusing on research context rather than individual actors, the design enables in-depth exploration of how policy instruments operate within school governance environments. The analytical framework integrates policy implementation theory with street-level bureaucracy to shift the unit of analysis from organizational structures to implementation mechanisms and discretion. This interpretive approach allows for systematic examination of how formal rules, appraisal systems, and role configurations structure discretionary space (Elbardan & Kholeif, 2017). Qualitative inquiry is therefore suitable for capturing the layered and context-dependent nature of policy enactment. The design supports conceptual reconstruction without reliance on primary data collection (Morgan, 2022).

Data were derived exclusively from secondary sources available within academic databases and authoritative policy repositories (Cheong et al., 2023; Ruggiano & Perry, 2017). These sources included government reports, education regulations, official policy guidelines, peer-reviewed academic articles, NGO publications, and credible media analyses related to professional learning governance and school leadership structures (Morgan, 2022). The unit of analysis was the implementation mechanism embedded in formal policy instruments, rather than individual schools or actors. Data collection procedures involved systematic document identification using predefined inclusion criteria emphasizing credibility, relevance, and policy authority. Thematic analysis was employed to code and categorize data according to analytical dimensions derived from the theoretical framework, including instrument design, discretion structuring, adaptive enactment, accountability pressures, and governance arrangements (Lochmiller, 2021). Coding was conducted iteratively to identify recurring patterns across regulatory texts and scholarly interpretations (Bingham, 2023). Analytical dimensions functioned as sensitizing concepts rather than predetermined variables. This structured document analysis enabled coherent mapping of policy instruments to discretionary practices without introducing primary empirical material.

Trustworthiness was enhanced through methodological triangulation across multiple types of secondary sources to reduce single-source bias (Schlunegger et al., 2024). Credibility was strengthened by prioritizing peer-reviewed literature and official regulatory documents, ensuring analytical claims were grounded in authoritative evidence. Dependability was addressed through transparent documentation of coding procedures and analytic decisions to allow replication by other researchers (Roberts et al., 2019). Confirmability was maintained by aligning interpretations strictly with textual evidence from the selected sources and avoiding speculative inference. Transferability was supported by providing detailed contextual descriptions of policy environments drawn from official documentation. Because the study relied solely on publicly available secondary data, no direct human participation was involved (Cheong et al., 2023). Nonetheless, ethical standards were observed by accurately citing all sources, respecting intellectual property rights, and avoiding misrepresentation of policy texts. Informed

consent procedures were not required due to the absence of primary data collection, and confidentiality concerns were mitigated by using only publicly accessible documents.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Governing Discretion in Professional Learning Implementation

The analytical problem addressed in this subsection concerns how policy instruments structure discretion within professional learning systems and how this structuring shapes implementation outcomes. Drawing on Street-Level Bureaucracy theory, discretion is understood not as deviation from policy but as an inherent feature of frontline governance. In educational settings, middle leaders function as intermediary implementers who translate regulatory expectations into actionable routines. Policy implementation theory further suggests that instrument design conditions the scope, intensity, and direction of discretionary action. The dimensions most relevant for interpreting the findings therefore include instrument formalization, discretion structuring, accountability coupling, adaptive enactment, and informal governance formation. These dimensions allow examination of how professional learning policies are operationalized within hierarchical and resource-constrained systems. In governance contexts such as Indonesia and other developing countries, where regulatory expansion often outpaces institutional capacity, discretion governance becomes particularly salient. This framework provides a structured lens to interpret how policy design shapes frontline enactment dynamics.

The first empirical theme concerns the degree of instrument formalization and its relationship to bounded discretion. Secondary regulatory documents reveal that professional learning policies are increasingly codified through appraisal rubrics, competency standards, and performance indicators. High levels of formalization narrow interpretive ambiguity by specifying procedural steps and documentation requirements. However, such codification does not eliminate discretion; rather, it redistributes it toward compliance management and documentation prioritization. This pattern aligns with the theoretical dimension of discretion structuring, where tightly specified instruments produce rule-oriented enactment. In developing governance contexts, including Indonesia, detailed ministerial regulations often coexist with limited supervisory capacity, generating a compliance-oriented culture. As a result, middle leaders may prioritize formal adherence over substantive pedagogical engagement. This theme directly addresses the research question concerning how instrument design shapes policy fidelity and highlights the research gap regarding the unintended consequences of high formalization.

The second theme centers on accountability coupling and adaptive enactment under performance pressure. Government reform agendas frequently link professional learning participation to career progression and institutional accreditation outcomes. This coupling intensifies the stakes associated with policy implementation and reshapes discretionary judgment. Under heightened accountability, middle leaders may adopt risk-averse strategies that favor standardized interpretation of policy instruments. Street-level theory predicts that such pressure conditions encourage coping mechanisms,

including procedural simplification and selective enforcement. In Indonesian governance settings, where bureaucratic evaluation mechanisms are strongly hierarchical, these dynamics are amplified. Middle leaders often operate within layered reporting structures that reinforce upward accountability while limiting horizontal deliberation. This theme demonstrates how instrument design interacts with accountability systems to influence adaptive enactment patterns.

A third theme highlights the emergence of informal governance networks as mediating structures within professional learning implementation. Secondary analyses of policy commentary and institutional reports indicate that informal mentoring, peer recognition, and expertise-based influence frequently supplement formal structures. These networks shape access to information, interpretive authority, and developmental opportunities. From a theoretical perspective, this phenomenon corresponds to the dimension of informal governance formation, where discretion becomes embedded in relational dynamics rather than solely formal rules. In contexts with uneven resource distribution, informal networks may compensate for administrative gaps but also reproduce hierarchical privilege. Indonesian education governance often reflects strong collegial cultures intertwined with bureaucratic authority, creating hybrid governance patterns. The presence of informal governance complicates assumptions of uniform implementation fidelity. This theme responds directly to the identified gap concerning micro-level policy interpretation and discretionary variation.

The fourth theme concerns equity implications arising from differential discretion allocation. Policy instruments that concentrate authority in specialized roles or hierarchical chains may unintentionally produce unequal access to professional learning support. Street-level theory suggests that discretionary prioritization often favors actors perceived as compliant or high-performing. Secondary policy analyses indicate that performance-linked professional learning systems risk reinforcing pre-existing disparities across schools and regions. In developing-country governance systems characterized by uneven infrastructure and fiscal capacity, these inequities become more pronounced. Indonesian decentralization reforms, for example, have generated variability in local implementation capacity, affecting professional learning opportunities. Instrument design therefore shapes not only fidelity but also distributive outcomes. This theme addresses the research objective of examining how discretion governance influences variation and equity in policy implementation.

Taken together, these findings extend existing policy implementation theory by demonstrating how professional learning systems function as arenas of discretion governance rather than purely developmental mechanisms. While prior leadership studies emphasize structural coherence, the present analysis reveals that instrument formalization interacts dynamically with accountability pressures and informal networks. This interaction refines street-level bureaucracy theory by illustrating how educational governance contexts generate hybrid forms of bounded and adaptive discretion. The findings confirm theoretical claims that discretion persists even under high formalization but challenge assumptions that codification uniformly enhances fidelity. Contextual factors, particularly in developing governance systems, mediate how

instruments operate in practice. By foregrounding these mediating processes, the study bridges the gap between leadership research and bureaucratic implementation scholarship.

Furthermore, the analysis highlights contextual differences that are especially relevant in Indonesian and comparable developing-country settings. Strong hierarchical administrative traditions coexist with collaborative professional cultures, producing layered governance dynamics. Regulatory expansion in such contexts often increases procedural density without proportionate increases in monitoring capacity. This condition encourages adaptive enactment strategies that blend formal compliance with informal negotiation. The findings thus refine existing implementation models by emphasizing contextual governance configurations. Rather than treating discretion as a uniform phenomenon, the study demonstrates its variation across regulatory density and accountability intensity. These insights deepen theoretical understanding of how discretion governance operates in decentralized yet hierarchically supervised systems.

Finally, the integrated interpretation shows how examining professional learning through a street-level bureaucracy lens fills the previously identified research gap. By shifting the analytical focus from structural design to instrument-mediated discretion, the study uncovers mechanisms of micro-level interpretation, coping, and informal governance that were previously underexamined. It demonstrates that implementation outcomes are contingent upon how discretion is structured, monitored, and socially negotiated. This reconceptualization advances theoretical dialogue between educational leadership and policy implementation scholarship. It also provides a framework for assessing equity and variation within reform initiatives. Through this analytical integration, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of governance processes in educational reform contexts.

3.2 Adaptive Enactment and Street-Level Coping in Professional Learning Policy

The analytical problem in this subsection concerns how discretion, once structured by policy instruments, is enacted, negotiated, and adapted at the frontline of professional learning governance. Street-Level Bureaucracy theory posits that discretion is not merely exercised but actively reconstructed under conditions of workload pressure, ambiguity, and accountability demands. Adaptive enactment therefore becomes the crucial mediating process between formal instrument design and observable implementation outcomes. In professional learning systems, middle leaders must interpret standards, prioritize teachers, and translate procedural expectations into situated practice. These processes are shaped not only by formal rules but also by institutional culture, peer expectations, and bureaucratic risk. The theoretical dimensions guiding this analysis include interpretive latitude, coping mechanisms, rule adjustment practices, and negotiated compliance. In developing governance contexts, where administrative capacity and oversight intensity vary widely, adaptive enactment assumes heightened importance. Examining these dynamics clarifies how policy intentions are transformed in practice and directly addresses the research gap concerning micro-level policy interpretation.

The first major empirical theme concerns interpretive mediation as a routine practice of adaptive enactment. Secondary policy analyses indicate that professional learning standards are frequently framed in broad aspirational language, leaving space for contextual interpretation. Middle leaders translate these standards into concrete feedback, meeting agendas, and developmental expectations. This translation process reflects the theoretical dimension of interpretive latitude, whereby discretion operates within formally defined boundaries. In Indonesian governance settings, decentralization reforms have expanded local autonomy while maintaining centralized performance benchmarks, intensifying interpretive demands at the school level. As a result, middle leaders often reconcile national regulatory expectations with local resource realities. Such mediation processes demonstrate that implementation fidelity is contingent upon frontline sensemaking rather than rule clarity alone. This theme advances the research objective by illustrating how instrument design interacts with contextual interpretation to shape enactment patterns.

A second theme centers on coping mechanisms under conditions of workload intensification and accountability pressure. Street-level theory predicts that when frontline actors confront limited resources and high expectations, they develop strategies to manage demands. Secondary documentation suggests that professional learning policies linked to performance appraisal can generate administrative burdens requiring documentation, monitoring, and reporting. In such contexts, middle leaders may streamline mentoring processes, prioritize teachers deemed most responsive, or rely on standardized templates to expedite compliance. These coping strategies correspond to the theoretical dimension of adaptive simplification, where discretion is used to stabilize workflow rather than optimize developmental depth. In developing-country governance environments, including Indonesia, bureaucratic layering often multiplies reporting obligations without proportionate support. Consequently, coping mechanisms become integral to policy enactment rather than peripheral deviations. This theme directly responds to the research question concerning how discretion shapes variation in implementation outcomes.

The third theme highlights rule adjustment and negotiated compliance as features of everyday implementation. Professional learning instruments often distinguish between formative development and summative evaluation, yet in practice these boundaries can blur. Middle leaders may soften formal expectations to preserve collegial trust or intensify them to signal accountability seriousness. This pattern reflects the theoretical dimension of negotiated compliance, where formal rules are selectively interpreted to maintain organizational stability. In hierarchical governance contexts, rule adjustment may occur subtly to avoid upward sanction while preserving downward legitimacy. Indonesian administrative culture, characterized by respect for authority alongside strong relational norms, creates conditions conducive to negotiated implementation practices. Such dynamics reveal that discretion is relationally embedded rather than purely individual. By foregrounding these processes, the analysis fills the empirical gap concerning rule bending and informal adjustment in professional learning governance.

The fourth theme concerns discretionary prioritization and differential intensity of support. Policy instruments rarely specify how limited mentoring time should be distributed across teachers. Street-level theory suggests that frontline actors allocate attention based on perceived responsiveness, performance history, or risk exposure. Secondary analyses indicate that professional learning systems tied to measurable outcomes may inadvertently encourage concentration of support on teachers most likely

to demonstrate improvement. This prioritization aligns with the theoretical dimension of selective allocation, where discretion shapes distributive outcomes. In unevenly resourced governance settings, such as rural and urban disparities within Indonesia, discretionary allocation can amplify structural inequalities. Middle leaders operating under pressure may rationalize such decisions as efficiency-driven rather than inequitable. This theme reinforces the importance of examining discretion as a mechanism influencing both fidelity and equity.

Collectively, these findings refine Street-Level Bureaucracy theory by illustrating how adaptive enactment unfolds within structured professional learning regimes. While traditional SLB research emphasizes welfare or policing contexts, the present analysis extends its applicability to educational governance and leadership development domains. The findings confirm that discretion persists under formalization but show that coping and negotiated compliance are deeply intertwined with accountability architecture. Contextual differences in developing governance systems intensify adaptive practices due to capacity constraints and layered supervision. Rather than representing implementation failure, these practices reveal institutional strategies for stabilizing reform under constraint. This perspective challenges simplistic dichotomies between fidelity and deviation. It demonstrates that adaptive enactment constitutes a central governance mechanism within professional learning policy.

Furthermore, the analysis contributes to understanding how contextual governance features shape discretionary behavior. In Indonesian and comparable settings, decentralization interacts with centralized performance metrics to produce complex accountability environments. Middle leaders must navigate upward reporting requirements while responding to localized teacher needs. This dual pressure structure encourages adaptive simplification and negotiated rule application. Such patterns extend existing implementation theory by emphasizing multi-layered accountability as a driver of coping strategies. They also refine leadership research by situating professional learning practices within bureaucratic governance logics. Through this contextual interpretation, the study advances theoretical integration between educational leadership and policy implementation scholarship.

By systematically analyzing interpretive mediation, coping strategies, negotiated compliance, and selective allocation, this subsection deepens understanding of how discretion operates in practice. It demonstrates that instrument design alone cannot determine implementation outcomes without considering frontline adaptation processes. The findings fill the theoretical and empirical gap identified in the introduction by foregrounding micro-level enactment dynamics. They reveal how adaptive practices both stabilize and reshape reform trajectories within professional learning systems. This integrated perspective provides a foundation for examining how different discretion regimes generate distinct patterns of fidelity, variation, and equity.

3.3 Discretion Regimes, Policy Fidelity, and Equity Outcomes

The analytical problem in this subsection concerns how different configurations of discretion governance generate distinct implementation regimes and policy outcomes. While earlier sections examined instrument structuring and adaptive enactment, the remaining task is to synthesize how these dynamics crystallize into patterned governance effects. Policy implementation theory suggests that outcomes such as fidelity, variation, and equity are not solely products of rule clarity but of how discretion is institutionally organized. Street-Level Bureaucracy further argues that frontline discretion becomes routinized within particular administrative environments, producing relatively stable

enactment patterns. In professional learning systems, these patterns can be conceptualized as discretion regimes—configurations of formal instruments, accountability pressures, and informal norms that collectively structure frontline behavior. The relevant analytical dimensions here include discretion centralization, authority layering, accountability intensity, and distributive effects. Examining these dimensions allows systematic comparison of governance configurations. This approach directly addresses the research gap concerning how organizational design shapes policy fidelity, variation, and equity.

The first empirical theme concerns centralized discretion regimes characterized by hierarchical authority layering and tightly coupled accountability mechanisms. In such configurations, professional learning policies are embedded within formal appraisal systems and monitored through standardized reporting structures. Discretion remains present but is vertically structured, with clear lines of oversight and bounded interpretive space. This arrangement aligns with the theoretical dimension of discretion centralization, where authority is concentrated and monitored through bureaucratic channels. Secondary analyses indicate that in highly regulated governance contexts, including centralized education systems, such regimes may produce higher apparent policy fidelity. However, fidelity in this context often reflects procedural compliance rather than substantive pedagogical transformation. In Indonesian administrative settings, where ministerial directives strongly influence school operations, centralized discretion regimes can reinforce upward accountability norms. This theme demonstrates how instrument configuration shapes fidelity outcomes while potentially limiting adaptive responsiveness.

A second theme identifies segmented discretion regimes that emerge when professional learning authority is distributed across specialized domains or parallel governance structures. In these regimes, specialist roles or technical units interpret policy instruments within their specific areas of expertise. Theoretical dimensions of authority layering and domain-specific discretion are particularly salient here. Segmentation allows for depth of implementation in targeted areas but can generate uneven standards across institutional domains. Secondary documentation suggests that decentralized or hybrid governance environments often produce such segmented arrangements, especially where reforms introduce new specialist mandates without restructuring core hierarchies. In Indonesia's decentralized education system, local variation in capacity and leadership expertise amplifies segmentation effects. This regime can enhance contextual adaptation but may also institutionalize variation across schools or departments. The theme directly addresses the research objective of understanding how different instrument configurations influence intra-system variation.

The third theme concerns distributed discretion regimes marked by high interpretive latitude and informal governance networks. These regimes arise when professional learning policies emphasize inquiry, collaboration, and peer-driven development with limited hierarchical monitoring. The theoretical dimension of adaptive flexibility is central, as frontline actors possess significant autonomy in defining developmental priorities. While such regimes may foster innovation and local ownership, they also produce substantial variability in implementation intensity and quality. Secondary analyses of reform initiatives in developing governance contexts show that distributed regimes often depend on relational trust and professional culture rather than strict compliance systems. In Indonesian contexts characterized by strong collegial traditions alongside bureaucratic oversight, distributed discretion can coexist with formal accountability, creating hybrid regimes. This configuration illustrates how equity

outcomes may hinge on informal access to influence and expertise. By highlighting these distributive implications, the theme responds to the identified empirical gap regarding equity in professional learning implementation.

Collectively, these regimes demonstrate that policy fidelity and variation are products of discretion governance rather than purely structural coherence. The comparison refines policy implementation theory by introducing the concept of discretion regimes as meso-level explanatory constructs. While classical SLB theory focuses on individual coping strategies, this analysis emphasizes patterned institutional configurations that stabilize discretionary behavior over time. The findings confirm that tighter centralization can reduce visible variation but may suppress contextual adaptation. Conversely, distributed regimes enhance flexibility but risk uneven equity outcomes. Segmented regimes occupy an intermediate position, combining technical specialization with potential fragmentation. These distinctions extend existing theories by situating discretion within structured governance typologies rather than isolated frontline decisions.

Contextual differences further illuminate how governance environments shape regime formation. In developing-country settings, including Indonesia, regulatory expansion often intersects with uneven local capacity, influencing which regime becomes dominant. Strong ministerial oversight encourages centralized discretion, while decentralization reforms promote segmentation and distribution. Resource disparities across regions intensify equity risks within distributed or segmented regimes. These contextual factors refine existing implementation scholarship by demonstrating how macro-governance structures condition meso-level discretion regimes. The findings therefore bridge leadership research and comparative governance studies. They also illustrate how policy instrument design interacts with broader administrative traditions and political incentives.

By synthesizing these themes, this subsection fills the theoretical and empirical gap identified in the introduction. It demonstrates that professional learning systems operate as discretion governance architectures with identifiable regime types. The analysis advances understanding of how instrument design, accountability structures, and informal norms collectively shape fidelity, variation, and equity outcomes. Rather than treating variation as implementation failure, the framework conceptualizes it as a patterned product of regime configuration. This reconceptualization contributes to policy implementation theory by foregrounding governance typologies within educational reform contexts. It also provides a structured basis for future comparative inquiry into how discretion regimes evolve across different administrative environments.

4. Conclusion

This study reconceptualizes professional learning systems as arenas of policy implementation governed through structured discretion rather than merely organizational design. By reframing middle leaders as street-level bureaucrats, the analysis demonstrates that principal-designed instruments function as mechanisms that shape, constrain, and channel discretionary practices. The findings show that instrument formalization, accountability coupling, and authority layering generate distinct patterns of adaptive enactment. These patterns crystallize into identifiable discretion regimes—centralized, segmented, and distributed—that influence policy fidelity, intra-school variation, and equity outcomes. Rather than viewing variation as implementation failure, the study illustrates how it emerges from institutionalized discretion under contextual constraints. The analysis also highlights how coping strategies, negotiated compliance,

and informal governance networks mediate professional learning enactment. In developing governance settings such as Indonesia, layered accountability and uneven capacity intensify these discretionary dynamics. Collectively, the study shifts explanatory focus from structural coherence to governance of frontline discretion as the central determinant of implementation outcomes.

The study makes three primary contributions to educational leadership and policy implementation scholarship. First, it bridges middle leadership research with Street-Level Bureaucracy theory by positioning professional learning as a domain of frontline governance rather than solely leadership development. Second, it introduces the concept of discretion regimes as a meso-level analytical construct that explains patterned variation across institutional contexts. This conceptual innovation extends classical implementation theory beyond individual coping toward structured configurations of authority and accountability. Third, the study contributes to comparative governance debates by demonstrating how developing-country administrative traditions condition discretion structuring and equity implications. By foregrounding micro-level interpretation, adaptive simplification, and negotiated compliance, the analysis refines existing theories of policy fidelity and institutional variation. It challenges the assumption that tighter formalization uniformly enhances implementation effectiveness. In doing so, it advances a governance-centered perspective on professional learning reform.

Future research should empirically test the discretion regime typology across diverse educational systems to examine its explanatory robustness. Comparative longitudinal studies could explore how regimes evolve under shifting accountability reforms or decentralization policies. Quantitative analysis of intra-school variation may further clarify the relationship between discretion structuring and equity outcomes. Additionally, mixed-method designs could examine how frontline actors perceive and justify adaptive enactment strategies under performance pressure. Research in developing governance contexts should pay particular attention to capacity constraints and regional disparities that shape discretionary allocation. Scholars may also investigate how digital monitoring systems alter discretion boundaries within professional learning governance. Finally, interdisciplinary collaboration between leadership studies and public administration research can deepen theoretical integration and strengthen policy relevance. Such inquiry would further illuminate how governance design influences the everyday enactment of educational reform.

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